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MUSKRAT CITY

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MUSKRAT CITY

By
HENRY ABBOTT

NEW YORK
1922

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MUSKRAT CITY

THE Irish cook one day proposed to the ship's captain the following conundrum: "Is anny thin' lost whin yeez know where 'tis?" The Captain assured him that in such case the thing was not lost. And Dennis responded: "Well, thin, shure, the ta-kettle is safe, for 'tis in the bottom av the ocean."

Bige and I thought we were lost. We did not know the way to our destination. We did not know the way back home. But realizing that we were in the heart of the trackless forest, we knew we were perfectly safe.

We had eaten an early breakfast that morning at the "Dan'l Boone Camp." We had made sandwiches for lunch, wrapped them in paper, tied the packages on the sides of our fish baskets, and had started for Plum Pond, where we expected to do some fishing.

We had been walking five hours and had not yet reached Plum Pond. In-

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deed, we felt quite sure we had passed it, either on the right or on the left. Also, it was possible that we had been, for the last hour, going northwest instead of southwest. It was raining and we had not consulted the compass very often. It had been raining for the past three hours, and now the water was falling in a flood, and we were soaked to the skin. Our shoes were filled with water and as we plodded on it sloshed, sloshed, with every step. We were bewildered, but it would do no good to stop, or turn back, so we continued to push on.

Presently, as we passed over a ridge and climbed down the steep hillside, we saw a cleared place in the bottom of the valley. Bige exclaimed, "Gosh!! Well I'll be doggoned! If that ain't Muskrat City." The map makers had not discovered the place, and Bige had never heard of it, yet the instant he saw it he knew its name was Muskrat City, and it shall so remain unless an act of legislature changes it.

At the bottom of a deep valley, with steep hills on either side, in the center of a beaver meadow was a collection of a score or more of conical shaped mud huts, about two and a half feet high and three feet in diameter at the base. In each of these huts there lived a male muskrat, his wife and family of seven to nine children. There also were numerous bachelor muskrats, who lived by themselves in holes in the bank.

Lest some of our readers may not be acquainted with a "beaver meadow," let us explain that at some period of time, long ago, possibly two hundred or maybe five hundred years ago, beavers lived here and built a dam across the brook as all beavers do. The dam backed the waters of the brook up and flooded the floor of the valley, thus drowning all the trees which were not cut and peeled by the beavers. These trees, of course, fell and decayed, so that not even stumps or roots were left. In the course of time the beavers either were exterminated by

trappers or they had exhausted their food supply in that valley and then emigrated to some other stream. In the absence of the builders, who must constantly make repairs, the dam had broken and the brush it contained had decayed. Only the stones and dirt used in its construction remained to mark the spot where it had once held back a beaver pond covering several acres. This space had remained swampy for some years and trees did not grow upon it. It was now covered with a rank growth of grass.

Many such places are found in the forest and they are always known as beaver meadows. They unquestionably mark spots where colonies of beavers once lived, though it might have been many years before.

The far-sighted, fore-handed pioneers who settled in the state of Iowa, with prophetic wisdom and civic pride of hope, loaded the labels of their communities with the word "City." After the lapse of eighty years, the last census showed

twenty-three "Cities" in that state having less than one thousand inhabitants each. Of these, six have less than three hundred each. "Promise City" in eighty years has acquired two hundred and seventy-eight inhabitants, while "Walnut City" beats the record with thirty.

We then did not know, and we do not now know, how many inhabitants there were in Muskrat City, but we feel confident they outnumbered the citizens of some of the Iowa cities.

By the time we had reached the floor of the valley, rain ceased to fall and in a few minutes the sun was shining. We were not only wet but we now realized that we were hungry. It was long past our usual lunch hour. Fish baskets were unslung from our backs and we found our sandwiches had been reduced by the rain to a mushy mess mixed with paper pulp. Indeed, a substantial part of our rations had been converted into liquid form and distributed along our route through the woods.

Without wasting time in vain cussing or discussing, Bige at once set to work building a fire on the gravelly beach of the brook. This was one of those occasions when a waterproof match box proved useful. But one should also know how to build a fire in the woods without matches. Any Boy Scout can tell you how to do it.

Nature has provided curly birch bark for kindling, for just such emergencies as this, and it is usually dry on the leeward side of the tree. In a few minutes a roaring, crackling fire was going, and our clothing—as much of it as native modesty would permit—was hanging on saplings which we had cut and stuck in the ground about the fire.

While this work was under way I strung up my rod, went up the brook into the edge of the woods, and in a deep hole caught some trout. I got six fine ones in about twice as many casts.

Bige dressed the fish while I got some striped maple leaves. They are about as

large as cabbage leaves but thinner. Each fish was wrapped in one of these leaves which was tied on with a piece of string. The packages were then dipped in the brook to wet the leaves and were buried in hot ashes and covered with live coals. In about fifteen minutes we pulled our fish out of the fire. The wrappers were charred and they looked like burned sticks. Breaking them open we found the skin of the fish stuck to the charred leaves and it came free from the flesh, which was pink and steaming.

For preserving the delicious flavor of freshly caught trout, this is the best method of cooking I know of. A thin inner layer of green birch bark, or a piece of paper, if one has it, will do for a wrapper.

Other methods of cooking, in the absence of the usual culinary utensils, are numerous. One we have practiced as follows: The sharpened end of a slender green sapling is stuck through a fish's mouth and lengthwise into the solid part

of its body. The other end of the stick, which should be three feet long, is pushed into the ground and the stick bent so as to bring the fish directly over a bed of live coals—not over the blaze. By this method several fish can be broiled at the same time. On other occasions we have built a bigger fire, with larger sticks of wood, found some flat stones twelve to fifteen inches across which we put in the fire and when they were quite hot, dragged them out, and laid our fish on the stones to cook. This also is an excellent way to cook bacon and we sometimes employ it even when a frying pan is handy. Of course, we washed the stones in the brook before they were put into the fire. But then, one can be quite sure that the fire will kill any stray microbe that the stone might harbor.

Freshly peeled birch bark makes excellent plates on which to serve primitive meals such as described.

Luncheon finished, and our clothes dry, we discussed our next move. Since

no one was left at Dan'l's who might worry over our absence, we decided to remain at Muskrat City over night, then make an early morning start toward the beginning of a trail to civilization.

In carrying out this program the first step was to prepare a shelter and a bed. The lack of an axe was a handicap, but our large pocket knives were made to serve. About ten feet from our fireplace lay the moss-covered body of a pine tree that had fallen out across the meadow, possibly fifty or seventy-five years ago. We cut two saplings and drove them into the ground seven feet from the log and five feet apart, leaving a fork on each of these posts five feet above the ground. A pole was laid across in the two forks, and other poles were laid sloping from this to the log. Then we peeled yellow birch bark to cover the roof and anchored the bark with heavy sticks above it. Brush piled against the two sides formed sufficient protection from the wind and the front was open toward the

fire. Balsam boughs were gathered for the bed and some firewood collected; then we went down stream to fish and explore.

During the past twenty-five years Bige and I have built many similar one-night shelters, in widely separated parts of the forest. We have slept under them with comfort when it rained. We have, on occasion, found white frost on the ground in the morning. The forest furnishes, free at hand, the materials required, and the labor involved is only an element of the pleasure of forest exploration.

Half a mile down the brook we found it emptied into a larger stream, where we soon filled a basket with trout. Also we picked a hatful of raspberries. We returned to the city in time for an early supper and as we had no dishes to wash we had ample time to discuss our probable location and the most promising course to pursue in the morning.

The chief charm of exploration lies in

the uncertainty of always finding what one starts out to find, and in the equal certainty that one may find something else, possibly even more interesting or more valuable than what was on the program.

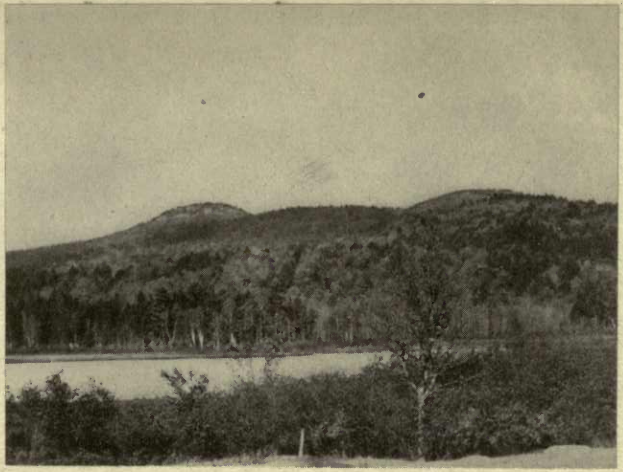
Columbus failed to discover a western route to India, but he found something else, and got himself put into history and his bust in the hall of fame.

Bige and I failed to reach Plum Pond, but we found a better thing. The fishing in our two brooks was all that could be desired. There were evidences that the hunting would be good in this "neck of the woods," when the hunting season should open, and it was unlikely that any other hunters would penetrate to this remote section. Bige saw great possibilities in the fur crop when the hunting should be over, and trapping begin.

So, though we were hopelessly lost (?) in "an impenetrable forest," we slept comfortably, and peacefully, crawling out of our nest only occasionally when the

fire required another stick of wood. Only on such occasions did we see or hear the permanent residents of Muskrat City. As the fire was kicked together and a fresh stick thrown upon it, causing a shower of sparks to shoot upward, then would be heard a rapid succession of splashes as fifteen or twenty rats would plunge into the brook and scurry to their hiding places. Otherwise, they silently went about their business.

About seven o'clock on the following morning, we climbed the ridge over which we had come into Muskrat City, and taking careful note of landmarks, we proceeded in a general eastward direction. One can usually see but a short distance in an unlumbered forest. After two hours of slow and difficult travel we climbed a high and steep hill. When we neared the top we noted a rocky ledge on the summit. Scrambling to the top of this, we had an unobstructed and extended view over valleys and foothills,

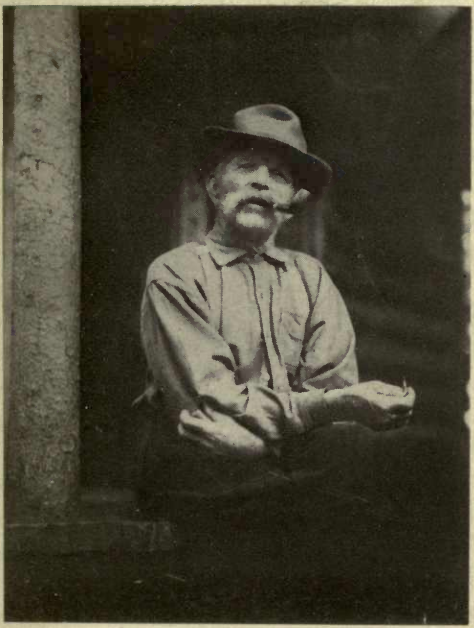


Owl's Head Mountain in the distance

and saw mountain peaks in every direction.

A long distance off to the northeast loomed up the highest peak of all, which from its height and its two rounded, bare knobs, we knew to be Owl's Head Mountain. We also knew that it was but two miles from the top of Owl's Head to the Dan'l Boone Camp. We trained the compass on that peak and took a fresh start toward home. For many years Bige and I had hunted partridge and deer on every side of this mountain and over its foothills. On many occasions, also, we had been on its bald summit. So now, on returning to its shadow, we should be on familiar ground.

Jim Flynn now lives on Owl's Head Mountain, from the time the snow has melted in the woods in late spring until the snow begins to fall again in the autumn. Jim is employed by the State Conservation Commission to watch out for fires in the forests. When Jim discovers the beginning of a fire anywhere

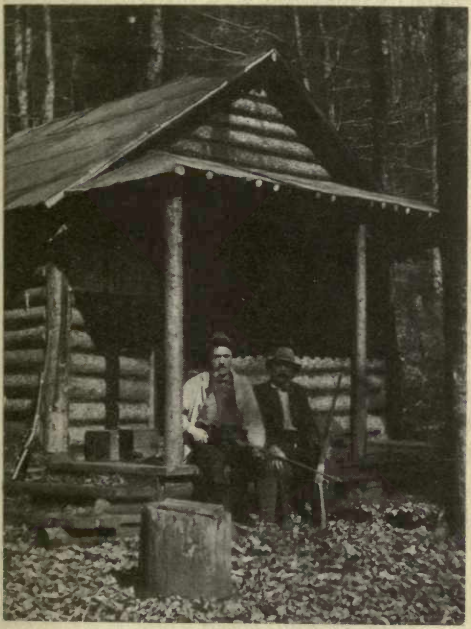


Jim Flynn

in the range of his outlook, the fact and location is reported by telephone to the chief at fire headquarters, when men with tools are dispatched from the nearest settlement to put out the fire before it gets beyond control. This service was established in 1909 with lookout stations on the tops of all the high peaks in the Adirondack range. Since that date there have been no disastrous forest fires in that region.

Jim lives in a log cabin which he built just below the rocky ledge which covers the summit. On the high point a steel tower thirty-five feet high carries his lookout station above the tree tops. This is a rather lonely spot in which to live half the year. On rainy days, when there is little danger of a fire making headway, Jim is permitted to visit his family at the settlement on the lake, and to bring back fresh supplies.

Jim is glad to have visitors call upon him at his mountain-top resort, and to encourage such he has made an excellent



Jim Flynn's Cabin

trail to the nearest point on Long Lake, about three miles, and has marked it with signs to point the way up the mountain. Jim will lend you his field-glass, name the points of interest in view, make coffee for you, if you bring the makings, and discuss with you the latest political questions, philosophy or religion.

In a book entitled, "The Adirondack, or Life in the Woods," published in 1849, J. T. Headley, the author, writes about his visit to the top of Owl's Head Mountain, with his guide, Mitchell Sabattis, an Indian, and the first settler on Long Lake. Headley says that in returning they "lost their way and were fourteen hours without food." He describes the view from the top of Owl's Head as follows:

> "It looks off on a prospect that would make your heart stand still in your bosom. Look away toward that distant horizon! In its broad sweep round the heavens, it takes in nearly four hundred miles, while between

Jim in his Look-out Tower

slumbers an ocean—but it is an ocean of tree tops. Conceive, if you can, this vast expanse stretching on and spreading away, till the bright green becomes shaded into a deep black, with not a sound to break the solitude, and not a hand's breadth of land in view throughout the whole. It is a vast forest-ocean, with mountain ridges for billows, rolling smoothly and gently on like the subsiding swell of a storm. I stand on the edge of a precipice which throws its naked wall far down to the tops of the fir trees below, and look off on this surpassing wild and strange spectacle. The life that villages, and towns, and cultivated fields give to a landscape is not here, neither is there the barrenness and savageness of the view from Tahawus. It is all vegetation —luxuriant, gigantic vegetation; but man has had no hand in it. It stands as the Almighty made it, ma-

jestic and silent, save when the wind or the storm breathes on it, waking up its myriad low-toned voices, which sing:

'The wild profound eternal bass
In nature's anthem.'

Oh, how still and solemn it slumbers below me; while far away yonder, to the left, shoots up into the heavens the massive peaks of the Adirondack chain, mellowed here, by the distance, into beauty. Yet there is one relief to this vast forest solitude —like gems sleeping in a moss bed, lakes are everywhere glittering in the bright sunshine. How calm and trustingly they repose on the bosom of the wilderness! Thirty-six, a hunter tells me, can be counted from this summit, though I do not see over twenty. * * * Some of these are from four to six miles in width, and yet they look like mere pools at this distance, and in the midst of such a mass of green.

Jim entertaining a guest on the mountain

I have gazed on many mountain prospects in this and the old world, but this view has awakened an entirely new class of emotions."

As Bige and I descended the steep slope from our lookout, we were quickly buried among the evergreens, with the only extended view toward the blue sky and floating clouds above the tall tree tops. Having in mind the experience of the previous day, the compass was frequently consulted, but travel was difficult and progress slow.

An hour later we came upon a small log cabin, having a roof of spruce bark, no floor, but a puncheon door and one window. In one corner was a crude fireplace made of stones, having two lengths of stove pipe which passed through the window for a chimney. Opposite the fireplace was a balsam bed and in another corner was a pile of spruce gum. There were also a frying pan, tin plate, knife and fork, and on a bark shelf some food stuff. We left the shack and on a path

a short distance from it, we met its owner who was returning. He was of uncertain age, but with white hair and white scraggy beard. He carried a bag partly filled with gum and in one hand a long pole having a small shovel-shaped piece of steel fastened to one end. This implement he used to loosen a ball of gum that was too high on the tree trunk to be otherwise reached.

The man proved to be Sam Lapham. Bige knew him and I had often heard about him. Sam spent most of the summer collecting spruce gum, which he was able to sell for a good price. This unfrequented part of the forest was one of his camping places during the "gumming season." The sticky juice of the spruce tree oozes out through cracks in the wood, and collects on the bark where it hangs in lumps from the size of a child's thumb up to the dimensions of a hen's egg. In the course of years of exposure to the air this pitchy material crystallizes, "ripens," and becomes spruce gum. On

Blue Mountain seen from Owl's Head

inquiry we learned that there is a constant demand for spruce gum, but an insufficient supply since few make a business of collecting it. It appears that a few pounds of clarified spruce gum and an equal quantity of "chicle" from South America are mixed with a carload of paraffine wax and some flavoring extract, the result being the "chewing gum" of commerce which is distributed by the one-cent slot machines, and furnishes exercise for the jaw muscles of the rising generation. It has been estimated that more than five million dollars are expended for chewing gum in the United States every year.

It also is possible to chew pure spruce gum, just as it is broken from the tree trunk. I have tried it. In this operation one must "watch his step" to avoid lockjaw. At least, caution must be exercised until the quid is well "started." I understand that in some places it is possible, at an increased cost, to buy spruce gum that has been "started."

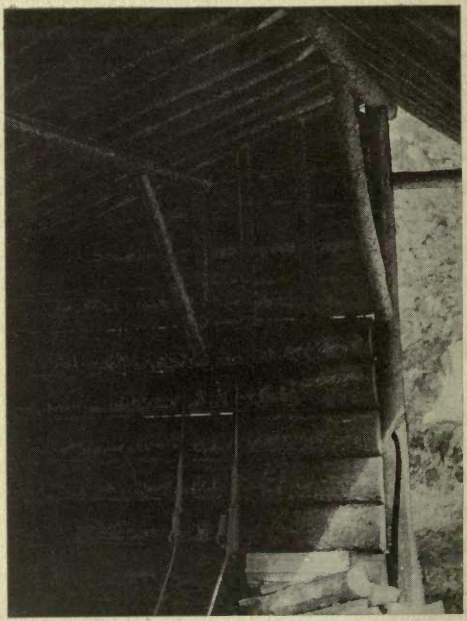
We reached Dan'l's in time for a late luncheon and were none the worse for our exploit. While we were on our look-out mountain we recognized several lakes and ponds and learned that Plum Pond was a long way from Muskrat City and to the south of it. Also, while there, on a piece of birch bark we made a topographical map of the region in view and laid out a new route to Muskrat City. This route was not a direct bee-line. It was circuitous, but it would avoid the swamps, the deep valleys and the steep ridges, and also would enter the city following up along the brook.

Having gone out to our headquarters on the lake for fresh supplies, a week later we made another trip to Muskrat City. This time we carried a small tent, an axe and food to last a week. While there we built a log lean-to camp. It was placed on a shelf, or narrow level space on the steep hillside, about seventy feet above the bottom of the valley. The shelf was just wide enough for our build-

Owl's Head over the roof of saw mill

ing and the fireplace in front. There were plenty of stones on the ground with which we built the fireplace. We chose this elevation for our building site because it would be above the fogs that often at night settle in the bottom of a valley, on a stream or pond.

A rill, tumbling down the steep hillside, draining a cold spring above, passed within thirty yards of the camp and supplied us with the kind of drinking water that, in the city, we buy for thirty cents a quart. This is a commodity that Nature distributes with lavish hand throughout this entire mountain region. On every hillside may be found one or more springs of pure soft water having a temperature of approximately forty degrees on the hottest days of summer. Here, the rheumatic, the dispeptic, the diabetic, and the fellow with kidneys, may have the poisons washed out of his system; while the balsamic air heals the rent in his breathing machinery. These processes may go forward, not while he sits



Inside of Camp at Muskrat City

on a hotel porch and broods over his troubles, but while he camps, explores, fishes, hunts and forgets his disabilities.

Bige and I made many trips to, and spent many days at, Muskrat City. We explored a large section of forest country adjacent thereto. In the season, we frequently ate broiled partridge, venison and other game, while a few minutes of fishing any day would furnish all the trout we ever cared to eat. When we required a variation in diet, we might go down stream about two miles to a pond and catch a mess of bullheads or frogs.

We made the acquaintance of many fur-bearing animals who lived in the neighborhood. In these Bige took a deep interest, since he was always looking forward to the winter season, when he should extend his old trapping line over the mountains to this valley. This, indeed, was one of the motives that induced the building of the camp. It provided a sleeping place for him at the outer end of his trapping circuit.

Personally, for many years, I have not engaged in the very strenuous sport of trapping. I shall, therefore, represent the trapper by proxy. When the snow in the forest is from four to five feet deep, one may travel on snowshoes over the tops of witchhopple bushes and much other underbrush which in summer impedes travel. Nevertheless, it is not child's play to drag a pair of snow shoes fifteen or twenty miles per day, visit a hundred and fifty traps, rebait and reset them, skin the caught animals, and carry home the hides. All of this, of course, must often be done when the thermometer is far below zero. On so long a trapping line as this would be, a comfortable boarding house at the outer end of the loop was, for many reasons, very desirable.

One of the frequent visitors to the brook that ran through Muskrat City below our hillside camp, was a mink. She often caught small trout, from three to five inches long. Some of these were

A Mink

eaten on the spot, others were carried to her nest in a hole in the bank. They doubtless were fed to her family of nine half grown young minks.

The mink is a small animal, having a long, slender body and short legs. It walks rather clumsily, with back arched upward, but it can go rapidly and gracefully in a springing, bounding movement. In this manner it often travels long distances. In a farming section, mink will rob the hen-house, eating eggs and killing young chickens. In the woods, mink catch mice, frogs and eat eggs of water fowl, but they specialize on small fish. In trapping mink, a piece of fish makes good bait. A large number of mink skins are required in making a fur garment for a human to wear, but considering its small size the trapper gets a good price for a mink skin.

On the hillside back of our camp, on occasions, a marten might be seen chasing a red squirrel over the ground, up a tree trunk, through the branches, jump-

ing from one tree to another, and generally catching and eating the squirrel. We don't care if he does. The red squirrel eats the eggs of the partridge and our sympathies are with the partridge.

The marten is one of the most graceful and beautiful animals in our forests. It has a rich brown coat and lives in remote, inaccessible parts of the wilderness. It is more shy of the human animal than is the mink. It is also about three or four times the size of mink and will sometimes attack and kill a mink or a rabbit. The marten will, when possible, vary his diet by eating nuts and small fruit.

The marten makes a nest of moss, grass and leaves, in a hollow tree or log or among rocks. They have also been found living in a squirrel's nest, doubtless after killing the squirrels. Bait your trap for a marten with a chipmunk, a wood-rat or a piece of meat.

A woodchuck sometimes ambled through one of the paths in the grass of

A Marten

the meadow. A farmer would strenuously object to the presence of a woodchuck in his meadow, where this animal would destroy a surprising quantity of clover. In this forest meadow no one objected, and since the woodchuck does not eat fish or flesh he was never molested. His wife, however, must guard her young, as there are several unscrupulous residents of this forest who would eat them without the slightest compunction.

Another fellow prowled about our valley, though he lived on the ridges. He is larger than a marten and is also a handsome animal, but of a somewhat different type. He sometimes attains an extreme length of three and one-half feet and weighs eighteen or twenty pounds. He is known as a "fisher." Sometimes, also, called "black-cat" or "black-fox." The fisher is very ferocious and is feared by all animals not larger than himself. He is powerful and agile; the swiftest and most deadly of all the smaller forest car-

nivores. He will kill marten, mink, raccoon, muskrat, rabbit, and sometimes a fox. A fisher will attack a porcupine, tipping him over and biting into his stomach and the underpart of the body, where there are no quills. Nevertheless, fisher, when trapped, are often found with porcupine quills in the skin and in various parts of the body.

The fisher catches trout, and gets larger ones than would satisfy the mink, so he is no friend of ours. The fisher also is charged with the crime of following the trail of the trapper through the woods, robbing his traps and eating the animals caught in them. Bige vowed that he "would get that fellow next winter," and he "would get thirty-five dollars for his hide." (Now it would bring a much larger sum.) The proper procedure would be to set a second and larger steel trap, carefully covered and chained to a tree, but without bait, in such a position that when the fisher undertakes his high-handed game of robbery he will walk on

and be himself caught in the second trap.

There was, of course, our old friend, the raccoon. He will find a camp anywhere, and if one is not careful he will find the camp larder and get away with the food. The coon has hands (fore feet) like a monkey, and he can use them as skilfully. The coon will eat anything a human will eat, and some other things. He takes his toll of frogs and trout, and he does not scorn the trimmings of trout we dress for our own table. Almost any kind of bait will do for the coon trap, and a coon-skin automobile coat will do for either man or woman having the price.

Red foxes seldom were seen in daylight at our city camp, though at night they were often heard barking. The fox is a very interesting animal and whether living in an open farming country or in the deep forest, he is credited with "living by his wits." By his acts he exhibits remarkable reasoning powers and adaptability to conditions that arise, though

they may never before have been met. In the woods his food is similar to that of the marten, although he cannot climb a tree to capture his prey. The fox specializes on partridge and other birds that nest on the ground.

About a trap, the fox is very foxy. Tracks in the snow show when he has visited one, and he will usually succeed in springing a trap without getting caught in it. No matter how carefully it may be concealed, he can, and often does, pull the trap out, tip it over, spring it from the under side, then take out the bait. Every trapper has his pet method of circumventing this foxy trick. The favorite systems include the use of a second unbaited trap, which the fox is expected to step on while he is playing with the baited trap.

The dream and hope of the lifetime of every trapper is to some day catch a freak, black or silver grey fox; the skin of which commands a fabulous price. Such a catch would be like finding a gold

mine. Of course, if these freak foxes were oftener caught, their fur would be less valuable.

The fact that, notwithstanding the number of trout eaters, including ourselves, who lived or roamed in our valley, there were still many trout in the streams, was to our minds conclusive proof that there were no otter in the neighborhood. An otter will clean the trout out of a brook in a few days. He will eat many and leave the rest dead on the bank, then move to another fishing place, ten or fifteen miles away. But there is no proof that an otter might not wander through this valley some time in the winter when the traps are set. The otter is a great traveler; also, in a fur store he is an aristocrat.

The varying hares, white rabbits, or snow-shoe rabbits, as they are variously designated, were plentiful in and near Muskrat City. They were often seen in the early dusk of evening, seldom in midday. They, in common with many small

forest animals, are night prowlers. Doubtless for protective purposes, Nature provides this animal, like the deer and some others, with the faculty of changing the color of its coat with the change of seasons. When the snow falls in autumn, this breed of rabbit molts its brown summer fur and takes on a new coat as white as the snow itself. Again, when the snow melts and disappears in spring the varying hare sheds its white fur and acquires a new coat of brown for summer wear. The hind feet of this animal are exceptionally large, especially in winter when the long spreading toes are entirely covered with still longer fur, thus forming broad snow-shoe shaped pads which enable their owner to freely move about on deep soft snow. It is a curious fact that the tracks left in the snow by this animal show the large spreading prints of the two hind feet, placed ahead of the smaller imprints of the fore feet, which at the end of a lope always bring up in the rear.

When startled, this rabbit has the habit of rapidly thumping on the ground with its hind feet, making a dull drumming sound which may be heard for a considerable distance. This thumping also is said to be a signal employed during the mating season.

Several years ago I witnessed a fight between one of these rabbits and a domestic cat. The rabbit was a captive, enclosed by a tight fence in a pen about sixteen feet square, in one corner of which was a covered nest containing seven young rabbits. The cat had climbed into the pen and was trying to steal a baby rabbit, when the mother jumped on the cat's back and beat a rapid tatoo thereon with its hind feet, and doubtless with toe nails extended, as the air was filled with flying fur. The cat escaped over the fence, but for many days it went about with a sore back, unprotected by its normal coating of fur.

The snow-shoe rabbit is generally defenseless against its many forest enemies,

and falls an easy victim to the trapper. It is a strict vegetarian in diet, and in its forest home does no harm to man or other animal.

The muskrats, who owned the city, however, were most in evidence. They held the center of the forest stage, and always secured the most attention. Perhaps this was because there were more of them in our valley than there were of any other animal. Possibly because the muskrat is the most numerous of any fur-bearing animal in North America. It is reported that in 1914 ten million American muskrat skins were sold in London. Of course, during the same year other millions were sold in the fur markets in various cities in the United States.

The muskrat has a compact body about twelve inches long from nose to root of tail. The tail is long, naked and scaly, slightly flattened vertically. It is used as a rudder in the water. The hind feet have short webs and are otherwise adapted for swimming. Its fur is fine

A Muskrat and his house

and dense, interspersed with long, coarse hairs. Its color is dark umber brown, except on the stomach, which is grey. It has a musky odor due to secretions of a large gland. The muskrat is very prolific, usually having several litters of young in a season, totaling often as many as eighteen during a summer.

Muskrats feed on roots and stems of succulent water plants and other vegetables, varied with an occasional frog, fish, or fresh-water clam. A muskrat who lives near our cottage has the habit of opening clams and leaving the shells on our dock every night. The shells we are obliged to sweep off in the morning. "Musky" builds on the marsh, in the edge of a pond or near a stream, a curious cone-shaped house or lodge. He stores up roots and grasses for winter use, frequently building these in with mud into the walls of his house. Then in case of shortage of other food, he eats his house.

Bachelor or unmated muskrats some-

times dig holes in the bank of pond or stream, making the entrance under or near the water. Also, they sometimes build nests in tangled grass or a brush pile.

A muskrat skin brings to the trapper a smaller return in unit value than any other fur-bearing animal he captures. But he gets more of them, so if market conditions are favorable the total revenue from his catch is likely to be satisfactory. In the manufacture of fur garments, however, the humble muskrat holds an important place. In a fur factory, by the skilful use of tweezers for pulling out the coarse grey hairs, by the use of clipping and singeing machines, with the aid of dyes ("made in Germany") of various colors, his skin is effectually disguised and it emerges therefrom not only in larger numbers than the skins of any other four-footed beast, but completely transformed in appearance, and masquerading under more different aliases than

are permitted to all the other fur animals combined.

For example, the former resident of Muskrat City might appear in the showroom of the fur dealer as "river mink," "mountain marten," "valley sable," "spruce beaver," "brook fisher," "domestic raccoon," "hillside fox," "fresh-water otter," "Hudson seal," etc., etc. Also, sometimes he does good service under plain "muskrat."

During many seasons since our first visit trappers have taken from their backs the coats of many residents of Muskrat City. These have been transformed and now, in cold weather and in hot weather, cover the backs of women in other cities. Also, their four-footed neighbors have captured and eaten many muskrats; nevertheless, the colony seems to be just as numerous as when we first knew it.

The snows of twenty winters have fallen in the forest since Bige and I put Muskrat City on the map, and since we built the camp on the hillside above it.

Other trappers have followed Bige's trail through the woods and have taken their toll of the inhabitants. But I am confident that if a census were taken today, it would be found that in population Muskrat City is holding its own quite equal to some of the cities in Iowa.

Doubtless it is a wise provision of Nature that those animals, birds and fishes which are most killed and eaten by others are made most prolific. Such thinning of their ranks may be necessary to avert famine, disease or some worse disaster among them. In view of their many predatory enemies, not forgetting the human killer of fish, it is marvelous that any trout of legal size are found in a brook.

Noises of the forest night are always interesting. While the camp fire burns, the forest people in its immediate vicinity are generally quiet. The fire is an unusual experience for them. It attracts them. They are fascinated by it, as are small boys by a circus, and while it burns they are likely to suspend their usual oc-

cupations and watch the flare and flicker of the blaze and the wierd shadows it casts. Many of the less timid may approach quite near, others more wary will circle quietly and cautiously about at a considerable distance but always in view of the fire. If there should happen to be a light fall of snow on the ground the tracks visible in the snow in the morning will disclose the names of the visitors at the camp fire.

Later at night, however, when the fire has died down, and is no longer visible, one's forest neighbors will resume their usual occupations, and the wakeful camper may listen to the patter of hurrying footsteps, to the scratch of toe-nails on bark as a climber goes up or down a tree trunk, to the sniff of the inquisitive fellow who smells about the camp, to the chatter of the chap who talks to himself, to the loping or jumping noises, to the splashes in the brook, to the last despairing cry of some small animal as his life is being crushed out by his captor. A

deer, softly stepping along his beaten path which leads down the valley to a pond where he goes every night for drink, for water plants, or just to wallow, may encounter a breeze bringing to his nostrils the human scent. He then will blow his bugle blast, which can be heard a mile. In such case the wakeful camper is never in doubt as to who spoke. The same is true when the owl booms out across the valley his eternal question, "Who?" No other bird or beast ever speaks in the same tone of voice. But most of the smaller noises of the forerst night are subjects for speculation. One always instinctively tries to analyze and allocate each noise to its author. In this game an intimate knowledge of the habits of forest residents is useful, so that, at the camp breakfast in the morning, one may confidently assert that so and so visited the camp last night!

When, as sometimes happened, both Bige and I were wakeful at the same time, the breakfast hour was made inter-

esting by differing opinions, and discussions over the habits and identity of our noisy neighbors. There are, of course, many birds and a few animals who sleep at night, and are met with only in the daytime. These were not considered in our discussions.

One night at Muskrat City, both Bige and I were suddenly awakened by most unusual sounds coming from the direction of the hillside across the valley. Bige sprang up to a sitting posture, exclaiming, "Sufferin' Cats! Did you hear that noise?" I did; and expressed the opinion that "the suffering of the cats was acute." Immediately, the sounds were repeated, if possible louder than before. It would be difficult accurately to describe those sounds. We were reminded of disputes we had heard, in the back yard, between two Thomas cats, whose wordy arguments over their respective claims to "Mariah" often ended in scratching and hair-pulling. I, however, never met any tom cat who could produce one-tenth of

the volume of noise that came across that valley.

There were two voices, one a little higher pitched than the other, and both talked at once. Beginning in a low-toned complaining wail like the last despairing cry of a lost soul entering perdition, remarks would follow each other in crescendo volume, and in ever increasing rapidity, epithets would be fired by the contestants until the snarling, sarcastic statements were fairly spat out, ending in shrieks that could be heard miles. After an interval of a few seconds during which the disputants seemed to have changed their positions, the argument was renewed, proceeding as before except that with each repetition the anger and violence of the scrappers increased. At the height of one of these tirades there was heard the scratching and tearing of toe-nails on bark as one wordy fighter seemed to chase the other up the trunk of a tree and through the branches. This was quickly followed by two thuds as of

one heavy body after another striking the ground, then the breaking of sticks, the rustle of leaves and brush as the two animals raced up the steep hillside. The race was punctuated by snarling, snapping sounds, which died away in the distance as the language fighters passed over the ridge until the sounds finally became inaudible. It was a dark night, and at no time did we get a glimpse, even indistinctly, of the scrappers. We are still speculating and wondering who or what they were.

This story has been told to many hunters and trappers familiar with Adirondack forests. Opinions have been sought as to the probable identity of these belligerent animals. So far, no plausible or reasonable suggestion has been made. Some of the old-timers say the tale reminds them of experiences of fifty or sixty years ago, when the bay-lynx, bob-cat or wild-cat made these woods and mountains their home and hunting ground; but they have been exterminated.

None of these cats have been seen for more than a generation.

Neither Bige nor I are acquainted with any animal capable of making the particular kind of noise we heard that night at Muskrat City. Our suggestion is, that possibly the wild-cats have come back.

One winter an unusual number of snow storms occurred, following each other in rapid succession until there was an accumulation of snow over five feet deep throughout the forest and on the roof of our camp at Muskrat City. This was followed by rain and freezing weather, turning the snow into ice. The great weight of ice and snow proved too heavy for the roof and it was broken down. In the following spring a large maple tree fell across the camp and crushed it into a tangled, shapeless wreck. Our log camp at Muskrat City has disappeared, but as a memory it shall remain forever!